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The WPUS and the Great Strike, I: New York City, Louisville, and Cincinnati

On Saturday, July 22, the Chicago-based National Executive Committee of the Workingmen's Party of the United States met, and decided to issue an appeal calling upon all workingmen to assist the strikers "in the warfare which they are now waging in defense of justice and equal rights." A subcommittee was appointed to draft the appeal. Meanwhile, a telegram was sent to President P.M. Arthur, head of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, pledging the assistance of the WPUS to his union.[1] That same afternoon, the NEC issued a communiqué to all sections, supporting the strikers and advancing demands for the eight-hour workday and for the nationalization of the railroads and telegraph lines. In view of the fantasies surrounding the party's activities before and during the Great Strike, it is worth reprinting this document in its entirety:

A CIRCULAR.

To all sections of the Workingmen's Party of the United States:

COMRADES—In the desperate struggle for existence now being maintained by the workingmen of the great railroads through the land we expect that every member will render all possible

moral and substantial assistance to our brethren in misfortune, and support all reasonable measures which may be found necessary by them.

(Signed)
THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
PHILIP VAN PATTEN, Corresponding Secretary

To all labor organizations and working men in general:

Comrades, we call your attention to the following questions, believing that the measures suggested will, if adopted, soon solve the difficulty now pending on all the great railroad lines of the land:

1. Proper steps should be taken by the National Government to enable it to take possession of and operate all the railroads and telegraph lines in the country, as is now done in all of the most advanced countries of Europe, thus destroying the greatest and most powerful monopolies of modern times.

2. The establishment in every State and by the National Government of an eight-hour work day, thus absorbing all the idle workmen whose ever-increasing number constantly added to by the rigid introduction of labor-saving machinery, is a constant menace to all those fortunate enough to have employment, and must inevitably reduce wages to a rate consistent with the standard of living of the most ignorant and uneducated workers, whose labor can be utilized.

(Signed)
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
Workingmen's Party of the United States.
VAN PATTEN, Corresponding Secretary[2]

Thus, a week after the strike got under way, the National Executive Committee was plainly seeking to provide organizational leadership and a program for the developing strike movement. But after issuing the first communiqué, it was unable to give cohesion to the strikes in a score of local communities. Members of the NEC became preoccupied with events in Chicago. Consequently, the party

section in each city was left on its own, and its role in the Great Strike varied from city to city. One thing, however, was constant: in no city did the Workingmen's Party of the United States advocate armed insurrection, and everywhere its influence on the 1877 strikes was a moderating one.

In some cities, the party exercised no influence at all. With less than 4,500 members, many of whom could hardly speak English,[3] and with sections in only certain urban centers, the party played no role whatsoever in the strikes in Martinsburg and other parts of West Virginia; in Baltimore and other areas of Maryland; in Hornellsville and Buffalo, New York, or in Terre Haute and Indianapolis, Indiana. Even in Pittsburgh, where editorials and articles charged that the events of July 22 and 23 were the result of the party's work, the WPUS appears to have exercised no influence. Not a single Pittsburgh paper mentioned the presence of one member of the party among the strikers or "the mob" in general. A study of the more than one thousand pages of the *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Railroad Riots in July, 1877,* the Pennsylvania legislature's inquiry into the Great Strike in the commonwealth, does not reveal a single reference to the influence of the Workingmen's Party in the strikes in Pittsburgh, Reading, Harrisburg, Allegheny City, Allentown, Scranton, or the other Pennsylvania centers. It is also significant that in his survey of the origins and development of the Great Strike, J.P. McDonnell, editor of the party's leading English-language organ, *Labor Standard,* not only denied that the labor uprising in any railroad center was organized by its members, but did not list a single party meeting in support of the strikers in West Virginia, Maryland, Indiana, Hornellsville, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Albany, Pittsburgh, Reading, or Scranton.[4]

In some cities, the WPUS confined itself to a single meeting expressing sympathy with the strikers. In San Francisco, the leaders of the party were able to hold a meeting on July 23 on the sandlots in front of the city hall "To Sympathize With the Strikers in the East," but only after they had promised that there would be neither threats of violence nor incendiary language. The meeting was ad-

dressed by party organizer James d'Arcy, D.J.H. Swain, Mrs. Laura Hendricks, and others. They denounced the railroads and voiced support for the eastern railway strikers. Resolutions were adopted expressing sympathy for the strikers, attacking the evils of "watered stock," opposing the granting of franchises, land, and money subsidies to private parties, deprecating the encroachment of capital on the rights and privileges of the people, and demanding immediate action by the state and federal governments to provide public works for the unemployed.

When the huge sandlot meeting, which was attended by at least eight thousand people, erupted into anti-Chinese violence which led to several days of attacks on the Chinese sections of the city, the two local sections of the WPUS canceled all future meetings and issued a circular that read: "Citizens and comrades: Our cause lives only through law, order and good government." The party applauded the Committee of Safety that was formed by businessmen to combat the anti-Chinese rioters.[5]

In Boston, Paterson, and Newark, the WPUS sections held one rally of sympathy with the strikers, expressed their opposition to lawlessness, and condemned the use of "military power." Before adjourning, the Boston meeting also endorsed the program outlined in Van Patten's communiqué, calling for the eight-hour day and the nationalization of the railroads.[6] The sections in Philadelphia called several meetings, but Mayor William S. Stokley, overlooking the fact that the act of the Pennsylvania legislature of May 13, 1850 (on which he based his action), did not authorize either the banning or dispersal of peaceful assemblies, invoked the act to ban public gatherings altogether. He also acted without legal authority to double the police force by adding 1,200 men. (The mayor's sole authority for this action came from a Committee of Safety, made up of 200 citizens, mainly businessmen, which he had appointed.) Thus, when large groups of workers attempted to meet under the auspices of the Workingmen's Party, the police charged the gathering and broke it up. Police arrested Workingmen's Party leader Joseph Steiner on a charge of inciting to riot when he persisted in an attempt to address

the peaceful assembly. They then confiscated all copies of the *Labor Standard,* which listed meetings scheduled by the Workingmen's Party in Philadelphia by specific dates and times.

When the party again attempted to hold a meeting, the police once more moved in and broke it up. This time, William McBride, a young worker, was killed by a police bullet in the back of his head. After this tragedy, the Workingmen's Party again tried to hold a meeting, and this time they took the precaution of presenting the resolutions to be presented at a meeting to the mayor. These upheld the strikers, but objected strenuously to the "wanton destruction of property" and promised to use only "honorable and lawful means" in support of the strike. However, once again the meeting was banned. A committee was dispatched to Mayor Stokley to demand that he uphold the right of peaceable assembly. The mayor responded that there would be no meetings permitted "for the present." With that, the Philadelphia sections of the Workingmen's Party gave up and announced that they would concentrate instead on organizing workers into trade unions.[7]

Only one Philadelphia paper, the *Record,* condemned Mayor Stokley's autocratic conduct, and asked if the mayor had decided to make himself "king of the city." A Philadelphia worker was more vehement in his criticism. Writing in the *Labor Standard,* he complained: "We—the *free* men of the great Republic, who habitually boasted of the freedom of our land are here at once brought to the condition of the European." None of the critics pointed out that Philadelphia was the largest stockholder of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company; that Mayor Stokley regularly served as chairman of the annual meetings of stockholders, and that he and the other leading city officials had "strong *financial* reasons" for wanting the strike speedily crushed and all strike sympathizers silenced.[8]

In New York City, on Wednesday, July 25, red flags were flying on the Bowery; and that night, in the glare of hundreds of torches, a crowd of some twenty thousand listened to socialist orators at a meeting sponsored by the Workingmen's Party. Only at the last minute did the party get permission to hold its assemblage at Tomp-

kins Square, scene of the brutal 1874 police attack on men, women, and children gathered at an unemployed demonstration. When Justus Schwab (himself a victim of the 1874 attack) applied to the park commissioner on July 23 for permission to hold the meeting, the commissioner indicated his clear displeasure. "You mustn't make such a disturbance as you made there in 1874," said the commissioner. "Mr. Commissioner," Schwab shot back, "[that] *you* made in 1874." After conferring with municipal authorities, the commissioner and Mayor Ely granted the party's request, and the meeting was scheduled for Wednesday evening, July 25.[9]

City authorities immediately took measures to prevent "another Pittsburgh."[10] All police leaves were canceled, and the First and Second divisions of the New York National Guard were called out. Tompkins Square was connected to the armories by telegraph wires; the New York Central's roundhouse and depot were garrisoned; two Gatling guns were placed at the heads of Wall and Pine streets, and seventy-five volunteers were mustered to protect the United States Subtreasury building. Finally, on Wednesday afternoon, two hundred policemen were assigned to the meeting, six hundred were put on reserve nearby, and over a thousand sailors and marines were held ready. It was estimated that 8,000 rifles and 1,200 clubs stood ready to put down a "Communist riot."[11] All day long, telegrams had been pouring into the city from mayors and governors who were worried that a large riot in New York would start more difficulties in their own areas, and who pleaded with Mayor Ely to call off the meeting. But Ely stuck doggedly to his decision. "The Dreaded Assemblage" took place, but not the expected riot.[12]

Not that the crowd was not angry. The previous Sunday, Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, speaking before his wealthy Brooklyn congregation, had infuriated the workingmen of New York City when he asked, "Is the working class oppressed?" and replied, "Yes, undoubtedly it is." Nevertheless, he went on:

> God has intended the great to be great and the little to be little. . . . The trade union, originated under the European sys-

> tem, destroys liberty. . . . I do not say that a dollar a day is enough to support a man and five children if he insists on smoking and drinking beer. . . . But the man who cannot live on bread and water is not fit to live.[13]

John Swinton, editorial writer for the *New York Sun* and labor champion, who had led the protests against the 1874 Tompkins Square outrage,[14] opened the meeting with a biting attack on the Brooklyn preacher:

> It gives me great pleasure in gazing upon this immense multitude to be able to say you don't look like a mob of rioters; that, on the contrary, it seems to me that you are quite as good-looking, in my opinion, as Henry Ward Beecher's church, for instance.

It was more than a little presumptuous, Swinton continued, for a man like Beecher, who earned at least $30,000 a year, to advise workingmen to be satisfied with a dollar a day and a diet of "bread and water." Of course, it was not a diet Beecher recommended to everyone: "The rich should have bread and meat and wine, but the workingmen should have bread and water."[15]

Turning to the issue that had brought the vast audience together, Swinton praised the Pennsylvania Sixteenth Regiment for refusing to fire on the strikers at Reading:

> Glory, gentlemen! Glory to the militiamen who refused to fire on these men! *(Cheers.)* Glory, glory to that brave regiment. *(Cheers.)* Glory to the 16th Pennsylvania! *(Cheers.)* Let us send the echo of these cheers to Pennsylvania, and to that 16th Regiment, and let them know that a hundred thousand stalwart voices in New York were raised in acclaim of glory on such patriotism, and honor, and courage.[16]

After this, Leander Thompson, secretary of the New York section, read the resolutions submitted by the Workingmen's Party with re-

gard to the Great Strike (which the *New York Times* somewhat disappointedly described as "only half as inflammatory as it was anticipated they would be").[17] They expressed the "heartfelt sympathy" of the workingmen of New York with the "railroad men on strike in different localities of the country," denounced all corporations as "the most despotic enemies of the working classes," urged the working class of the country to unite in their own political party as soon as possible in order to emancipate themselves, and concluded with the assertion that while the Workingmen's Party of the United States stood for law and order, once in power, it would confiscate the wealth of the corporations for the benefit of the workers.[18]

Then an address to President Hayes was read, pointing out that three million of the "bone and sinew of the country" were "wandering vagabonds," while "a large portion" of those employed were "on the verge of starvation." Yet all the government had thus far been able to offer these unfortunate Americans was "the hangman's rope and the soldier's bullet." The calling out of troops in the struggle between the railroad workers and miners and the corporations, it declared, was a foolhardy blunder, since it showed the working classes that their government served only the interests of the corporations. The address went on to note that although the government was supposedly committed to a *laissez faire* policy, it had consistently legislated in behalf of capital and ignored labor. This was the primary cause of the Great Strike, and the only way to prevent future outbreaks like it was to seize control of the nation's transportation and communication system and its banks. Unless the trend in favor of capital was halted, the nation would face a revolution of the "white wage slaves of the North" which would cost the Republic "more blood and treasure than ever the emancipation of the black chattel slaves of the South did. . . ." It was up to President Hayes, the address concluded, to prevent this awful calamity by proving that the government understood that "the prosperity and perpetuity of this nation rests upon the principle of justice to labor."[19]

After the resolutions and the address to the president had been approved, Thompson launched into a long attack on corruption in

government circles. He charged that such corruption was inherent in the political structure of the United States government and referred sarcastically to Hayes's current civil service reform as a mere change of officers that would not end the "boodling." He recommended that the United States transform itself into a socialist state and thereby eliminate class inequalities.[20]

After a series of speeches in German at a separate stand, in which the substance of the proceedings was repeated, the meeting broke up quietly. On their way home, many members of the audience were repeatedly attacked by the police, who had apparently been spoiling for a fight.[21]

The fact that there had been no mention in any of the speeches at the meeting or in the resolutions and address to President Hayes of either trade unionism or the need for workers to organize more effectively on the economic front stirred the Marxists in the New York section of the Workingmen's Party to call another mass meeting the following night to voice the sympathy of the trade unions for the strikers. Present on the platform when the Cooper Union meeting got under way were delegates representing the custom tailors, ladies' shoemakers, bootmakers, cabinetmakers, carvers, cigarmakers, fresco painters, and the typographical unions. The chief speaker of the evening was J.P. McDonnell, Marxist editor of the *Labor Standard.* He pointed out that since the onset of the panic in 1873, American workers had been engaged "in a sort of guerrilla warfare for their rights" in order to survive, and yet had been unable to avoid being reduced to "the verge of starvation." Still, he contended, these struggles were not in vain, for they had "culminated in the present revolt against oppression," and no matter how quickly the Great Strike would end, and regardless of the final outcome, it would "leave marks behind that will never be forgotten." It revealed, for example, the identity of interests of workers throughout the nation. Workers in every city, town, and village now saw that "they could not live in decency"; and, without prearrangement, they had "resolved to make a determined stand against their oppressions." The Workingmen's Party of the United States had had

nothing to do with initiating or spreading the labor uprising: "There was no concert of action at the start. It spread because the workmen of Pittsburgh felt the same oppression that was felt by the workmen of West Virginia and so with the workmen of Chicago and St. Louis." It was, in short, a spontaneous uprising against oppression, without careful premeditation or organization.

Then again, McDonnell went on, the Great Strike had revealed in one fell swoop that all obstacles to working class unity could vanish in the crucible of the class struggle:

> It was a grand sight to see in West Virginia, white and colored men standing together, men of all nationalities in one supreme contest for the common rights of workingmen. *(Loud cheers.)* The barriers of ignorance and prejudice were fast falling before the growing intelligence of the masses. Hereafter there shall be no north, no south, no east, no west, only one land of labor and the workingmen must own and possess it. *(Tremendous applause.)*

But, he insisted, unity and militancy were not enough: "We must organize. Unorganized we are a mob and rabble; organized in one compact body we are a power to be respected. *(Cheers.)*" And if the workers permitted themselves to be fleeced by the employers, it was their own fault:

> You have neglected your unions and allowed yourselves to be led by the nose by every swindling politician. *(Applause.)* You are sheep without a shepherd. Union is your shepherd. Union thorough and complete—if you had that, do you think that one man could by nod of his head sentence you and your families to starvation? All this could be done without shedding a drop of blood or burning one depot. It is only the desperation of madness that prompts such acts, but it is justifiable because human nature cannot lie down to die. *(Applause and cheers.)* Do not be rash; you have no power because you have no organization. This you can do, you men of different trades—join under the banner

> of your trade unions and become one powerful national federation. Then you can do something; then you can become a power that no one can afford to despise.

Adolph Strasser, of both the Workingmen's Party and the Cigarmakers' Union, echoed McDonnell's advice in German. "Fellow workingmen," he pleaded to great applause, "organize yourself, organize your trade unions, form a state central committee and a national union of all trade unions, and we shall be able successfully to resist the tyrannical capitalists." The resolutions, unanimously adopted, stressed the same theme. After voicing a "strong protest against the manner in which the militia have been used against the people," and offering "fraternal greeting to the volunteer soldiers who fraternized with their fellow workmen," expressing "sincere sympathy with the railroad men and others who are now on strike," and pledging "to use every effort to render financial aid not only to the men on strike but to those work-people who have suffered by it," the resolutions concluded:

> That it is the imperative duty of all workingmen to organize in trade unions and to aid in establishing a National Federation of all trades so that combined Capital can be successfully resisted and overcome.[22]

Thus, while both wings of the Workingmen's Party in New York had spoken out in support of the strikers, each offered a different solution for the problems facing American workers. The Lassalleans called for immediate political action of labor while the Marxists urged the rebuilding of the trade unions, organization of new unions, and the establishment of a powerful national federation of trade unions. Having expressed these views, the New York City sections of the Workingmen's Party ceased their activity with respect to the strike for its duration.

On July 1, the Louisville & Nashville Railroad began cutting wages 10 percent. When this was accepted without a strike, the Louisville,

Cincinnati & Lexington Railroad, commonly known as the "Short Line," announced a similar 10 percent wage reduction to take effect on August 1. Even this did not disturb the *Louisville Courier-Journal,* which predicted that while disorders were the rule elsewhere, the working class of Louisville was too wise to wage war against their bread providers. But the paper soon had to swallow its words. On Sunday, July 22, informal groups of railroad workers began meeting to discuss their problems, and the next day a committee of Louisville Short Line employees was formed. Since John MacLeod, receiver for the line, was out of town and could not be contacted, the committee called on Chancellor H.W. Bruce at Chancery Court and requested that he rescind the wage cut order. Bruce acceded to their request.

That same evening, the railroad workers of the Louisville & Nashville line, except for the firemen and engineers, met at the Falls City Hall. They appointed a committee to meet the next day with Dr. E.D. Standiford, president of the Louisville & Nashville, and to present three demands: (1) all laboring men should receive a minimum of $1.50 per day; (2) all brakemen and switchmen should receive $2.00 per day; and (3) all other employees should have their pre-July 1 wages restored to them. The committee was instructed to inform Dr. Standiford that he would have until 5 p.m. that day to answer; if the demands were refused, the Louisville & Nashville workers would quit.[23]

On the morning of July 24, the committee visited Dr. Standiford and were told that even though they did not represent the engineers and firemen, he would restore the wages in existence prior to July 1.[24] The news of this concession stirred other workers in Louisville, including, in the words of the *Courier-Journal* reporter, some "idle negroes," led by "a strange one from Cincinnati" called "Buffalo Bill." They made the rounds of sewer construction projects and "induced" the men working on the sewers to strike for $1.50 per day instead of the prevailing $1.00. The Black sewer workers joined the demonstrators. The *Courier-Journal* stressed the fact that few whites were among the demonstrators, and described the sewer

strikers as "half-dressed, dirty-looking persons, evidently belonging to the worst class of colored men, . . . armed with jacks, shovels, and some with pieces of wood and sticks."[25] Later, Allan Pinkerton also emphasized the predominance of Blacks among the demonstrators, adding the gratuitous slur that anyone understanding the "mercurial nature of that childish and ignorant race" should know that Blacks require "but the veriest trifle to stimulate them into making a show of themselves."[26]

At around noon, the striking sewer workers reached the waterworks project at Crescent Hill, where about 370 men were employed at wages ranging from $1.00 to $1.28 per day. There the strikers announced that the men would not be allowed to continue to work until their wages were raised to $1.50 per day. Workers stopped what they were doing, and a number joined the ranks of the marchers. From the waterworks, the group marched to the center of the city, dwindling in size to about fifty persons, and by 4:30 p.m. they dispersed.[27]

While the strikers were making the rounds of the sewer construction projects, Mayor Charles D. Jacob issued a proclamation to the Louisville workingmen, admonishing them to preserve order, not to listen to any "incendiary language," and "to heed not the talk of idle and worthless creatures who, unwilling to work themselves, would gladly get you in trouble, that they may feast upon your misfortune." He claimed that in other cities, it had been "vagrants and tramps" who had caused the trouble, while the "poor workingmen" had to bear the "burden of the outbreak."[28]

During the afternoon, a number of leading citizens met at the request of Mayor Jacob and Police Chief Colonel Isaac W. Edwards and organized themselves to defend the city from any attack. City Hall was converted into a virtual fortress, and a detachment of several hundred men was dispatched to pick up arms and ammunition from the Frankfort Arsenal.

That evening, following a meeting in front of the courthouse during which Mayor Jacob was shouted down when he tried to read his proclamation, a procession was formed, and an estimated six

hundred persons, prominent among whom were the Black sewer workers, headed for the railroad depot. With stones that lay at hand near street excavations, the paraders shattered street lamps, one by one, broke windows in the homes of wealthy residents, and smashed the windows at the freight depot of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad. At the depot, a police contingent, with some difficulty, arrested two white men and one Black, who were accused of being the leaders. But the remaining paraders proceeded up Broadway, "yelling like fiends," and continued to break the windows of homes of the wealthy. When the crowd reached the Short Line depot, fifty armed police opened fire, and the crowd dispersed. By midnight, the streets were quiet. Seven hundred militiamen, many of them "influential and wealthy citizens," were on duty to assist the 175 policemen.[29]

The Workingmen's Party of the United States in Louisville had played no part whatsoever in the demonstration. While the crowds were parading through the streets, its English and German sections met jointly, appointed a committee to canvass every ward of the city to raise funds for the benefit of the strikers, and adopted resolutions expressing "deep regret of the recent vast destruction of property at Pittsburgh," but proclaiming the "necessity of workingmen all over this land taking a positive and emphatic stand for the rights of the laboring class of mankind." While fully supporting the striking railroad workers and urging a "restoration of the ten per cent, recently cut off their pay," the Workingmen's Party of Louisville expressed itself as "unfavorable to strikes," and as convinced that "the ballot-box is the medium between us and capital." It cordially invited "all workingmen to join in the Workingmen's Party of the United States":

> Let us present one unbroken front, we with our ballots and the capitalists with their dollars, and if we are true to ourselves victory will perch upon our banners.

The *Louisville Courier-Journal* reported the proceedings with some surprise: "The meeting was very quiet and orderly, and the

feeling, though earnest and decided, was not in the least violent or incendiary."[30]

In spite of this, Mayor Jacob failed to include the Workingmen's Party in a proclamation he issued at 2:20 a.m. on July 25, praising all who had not joined the "brutal, cowardly mob," and especially commending the veteran soldiers, men who had "adorned the Blue and honored the Gray," for subduing these "creatures" who were "brutes lower than those of the animal creation."[31] On the morning of the twenty-fifth, the mayor sent a telegram to Governor James B. McCreary, requesting additional men, ammunition, and guns, and the governor responded by sending several hundred rifles by special train. In addition, four hundred troops were ordered to proceed to Louisville to afford protection against further disorders.[32]

That Wednesday, the wildest excitement prevailed in Louisville. Striking laborers marched through the city, and business was completely suspended. With over a thousand men enrolled in the militia, the mayor anxiously awaited the arrival of United States troops. The police angrily denied the charge that they had fired only blank cartridges at the mob on the previous night, asserting that live ammunition had been used and that, in fact, several workers had been wounded. At the Short Line and the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, workers, with arms in hand, were guarding the railroad property.

At just about this time, young Louis Brandeis, recently graduated from Harvard Law School, returned from a party with his brother and found that the large front window of his family home had been smashed. The businessmen of Louisville held a long meeting to consider what should be done, and the Brandeis brothers joined the militia and patrolled the streets.[33]

"All's Well," the *Courier-Journal* reported, as it hailed the armed citizens who had patrolled the city, and wrote almost poetically:

> The silver moon is shining with luminous serenity upon homes peaceful and secure, while the only sounds that break upon the midsummer night air are the steady tramp of the patrol and the occasional hoof-clatter of the mounted guard.[34]

The Workingmen's Party of Louisville was totally uninvolved in any of the exciting events of July 25 and 26. The English section actually condemned the "lawlessness" of the "mob" when it applied for permission from Mayor Jacob to hold a meeting in Phoenix Hall Park. It even cited as evidence of its noninvolvement in the "mob's activities," the fact that the windows of the home of M.J. Nolan, secretary of the section, had been smashed, along with those of the wealthy residents.[35] The permission was granted, and the English section of the Louisville WPUS did hold a meeting on July 27, at which the speakers stressed that the party "deprecated the spirit of violence which had manifested itself all over the country," and which had "made itself felt even in our own city"; that it opposed "riots and mob violence," and counseled "moderation and peace in resistance to the oppression of capital." More than that, the party urged the workingmen to develop a "feeling of reciprocity with the capitalist, consistent with their interests and their dignity as men and citizens" (whatever that meant). It also announced that it rejected strikes, and instead "urged the necessity of finding a remedy for all evils at the ballot box."[36]

It was here that one of the instances of the fact and fantasy surrounding the Workingmen's Party manifested itself. Although the *Louisville Courier-Journal* published the remarks of the speakers quoted above, it nevertheless denounced them editorially as "the enemies of organized society," and blamed the riots in Louisville on the "spirit of communism" spread by the local members of the WPUS. The paper then called upon the authorities to ban the party:

> It is utterly repugnant to the spirit of our institutions. It will, if allowed to grow, prove a menace to our city in the future. Hence the first development of its destructive tendencies cannot be too promptly and severely dealt with.[37]

Other voices, however, argued that it was best to allow the Workingmen's Party to lead the working class struggle at the ballot box, as it proposed to do, and predicted that it would get nowhere.

However, as we shall see, these people were in for a rude political awakening in the August elections for the Kentucky legislature.[38]

The headline in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* of July 23, 1877, read: "THE RED FLAG. IT CASTS ITS UGLY SHADOW OVER OUR QUEENLY CITY."

On the day before, the *Enquirer* had carried the following notice inserted by the Workingmen's Party of Cincinnati:

GREAT MASS-MEETING
THIS AFTERNOON
At 2 o'clock at the Court Street Market Place.
All Good Citizens Are Invited to Appear.
Subject,
THE GREAT STRIKE OF THE RAILROAD MEN.

That morning, Cincinnati workers had read the news of the massacre in Pittsburgh and of the crowd's angry attacks on the Philadelphia soldiers. They drifted out of their houses to talk about the subject on the streets. At two in the afternoon, many fell in behind members of the German, Bohemian, and English-speaking sections of the Workingmen's Party, led by the Eureka Brass Band—headed by a man carrying "the blood-red flag of the Commune."[39] An "immense crowd," estimated in the thousands, filled the market place and was divided into four sections—two for the German-speaking contingent and two for the English. On the English side, Charles Thompson, the Workingmen's Party candidate for mayor, led off by emphasizing that if the strike reached Cincinnati, as it was bound to, since the railroad workers there had also had their wages cut 10 percent, all labor would support it, "for it was a law that whenever a reduction was made in the wages of one class of laborers, it was speedily followed by a reduction in others, and so all workingmen are concerned in seeing that the strikers succeeded in obtaining their rights." Furthermore, if, when the strike did come to Cincinnati, the authorities took possession of the depots and roundhouses to prevent the trains from being moved, and prom-

ised not to call out the militia, the Workingmen's Party would pledge that "it would support them in efforts to protect property and preserve law and order." Naturally, mail trains would be allowed to go through, but no freight or passenger trains.

C.M. Sawyer, the next speaker, blamed the Great Strike on the "wages system under which we are compelled to beg for employment from those who own the instruments of production." He predicted that such strikes would continue "with increasing bitterness" until this "dependent relationship" was abolished, and a system of "government control" substituted. Finally, he wanted it understood that while extending sympathy to the strikers, the Workingmen's Party of Cincinnati was convinced "that no permanent relief came from strikes, but only through the ballot-box." W.C. Haynes followed, and endorsed this last statement, adding that there was only one party the laboring men could trust, and that was the Workingmen's Party: "It is for the workingmen now and forever."

Resolutions were then presented and adopted. They charged the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Company "and similar monopolies" with having reduced the wages of their employees "to a starvation point, and thereby forced them to desperate measures in order to better their condition"; condemned the governors of West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, and President Hayes, for using the military powers "in favor of said monopolies, regardless of the will of the people, and against the people, slaughtering innocent men, women, and children," and concluded by pledging to "use all *lawful* means to support the downtrodden, outraged railroad employees now on strike."[40]

Then came the key speech of the afternoon, which was delivered by Peter H. Clark, Black member of the English-speaking section.[41] He condemned the railroad companies and their political allies, denounced the slaughter of workers by federal troops and state militia, and analyzed at some length the causes of the economic crisis and its impact on the working class. "I sympathize in this struggle with the strikers," he declared, "and I feel sure that in this I have the cooperation of nine-tenths of my fellow citizens." But sympa-

thy, he said, was not enough. It was necessary to create a society in which the widespread suffering that provoked the strike would be eliminated. "Every railroad in the land should be owned or controlled by the government. The title of private owners should be extinguished, and the ownership vested in the people." And this was only the beginning. Machinery—indeed all the means of production—had to be appropriated and used for the benefit of the people and not for private gain. There was only one "remedy for the evils of society"—socialism. "Choose ye this day which course ye shall pursue," Clark concluded to thunderous applause.[42]

The *Cincinnati Commercial,* which published Clark's speech in full under the heading, "Socialism: The Remedy for the Evils of Society," reported that he was "well received." *The Emancipator,* official organ of the Workingmen's Party of Cincinnati, said that his speech was "characterized by that deep pathos of feeling that is to be expected of one who can look back at the time when the wrong and injustice of capital abused his race, which by its labors and sorrows helped to build the greatness of this nation."[43] Clark's speech to the railroad strikers was probably the first widely publicized proposal for socialism by a Black American.

Although the *Cincinnati Commercial* had published Clark's speech, it made it clear that it did not agree with him. "Mr. Peter H. Clark," it noted editorially, "can not understand why it is that the military are always against the strikers. It ought not to be a great mystery to a man of his analytic powers." According to the newspaper, a worker had the right to leave his employment if he was not satisfied with his wages, but he had no right to take possession of his employer's property and dictate to him what he should or should not do. The employer had a perfect right to appeal for protection, and, if the sheriff could not provide it, the governor of the state was thoroughly justified in calling out the militia. The worker, having "done an unlawful thing," had "put himself outside the law, defied the civil authority, and has made himself penally liable." That was all there was to it. "It seems to us," it concluded, "if Mr. Clark would give his mind to the subject for a few hours he would be able to

discover why it is that the military are in such crisis as the present on the side of law and order."[44]

Clark, however, was not persuaded. In "A Plea for the Strikers," he reminded the newspaper that he had experienced enough of what it meant to be poor to understand the meaning of the words in Ecclesiastes: "I beheld the tears of such as were oppressed and they had no comforter." "With this fact imprinted on my memory by many years' sympathy with and service in unpopular causes, I do not marvel when I see the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice." As for himself, he was "in every fiber and nerve a law-abiding citizen," one, indeed, who deprecated "violent words and violent deeds as much as any one can. I am, sir, emphatically a law-and-order man." But not all the violent deeds and words "are on the part of the strikers and their friends." The advocates of "law and order" boasted openly that they were prepared to "wipe out the strikers and their sympathizers. Thumbs have been drawn significantly across the throats, and law-and-order men have pulled at imaginary ropes to give me an inkling of the throat-cuttings and hangings in reserve." The press, Clark pointed out, had no words of condemnation for such conduct. But the workers could hardly be blamed if they took such threats seriously and also took steps to defend themselves. Nor should the reaction of the workers to what they saw about them on the railroads be considered surprising. They were told that wages must be reduced because the railroads were losing money:

> But when they see high railroad officials receiving the salaries of princes, when they hear of dividends on stock and interest on bonds, they cannot understand why there is no money for the man whose labors earn these vast sums. . . . When they complain, they are told that they are at liberty to quit and take their services elsewhere. This is equivalent to telling them that they are at liberty to go and starve. . . . Hence they make the effort to obtain an increase of wages and to retain their places at the same time. Understanding their motive, and the dire necessity by which they

> are driven, I pity, but I can not condemn them. . . .
>
> Then too, the door of justice seemed shut in their faces. They have no representation on the Board of Directors. Every State has laws punishing conspiracy, punishing riot and unlawful assemblages, but no State has laws providing for the examination and redress of the grievances of which these men complain. The whole force of the State and National Governments may be invoked by the railroad managers, but the laborer has nothing.

Clark declared that every man possessed the right to resist injustice, and that no laws could take it away from him. "Hedged in and despairing, the railroad men have exercised this right," yet, as the newspapers could attest, "the strikers themselves, are neither destructive nor men of blood."

Clark concluded by defending the Workingmen's Party against the charge that it had stirred up the strikers to acts of violence. Actually, he maintained, there was probably "not a section of that party in any one of the centers of disturbance." Had there been there would have been less tendency to disturbance: "When workingmen understand that there are peaceful influences at work to relieve them of the thraldom of wages slavery, they will be more patient." Clark even proposed that the railroad managers "plant a section of the Workingmen's party at every station. They would guard their property more effectually than the whole United States army can do it."[45]

The *Emancipator* applauded Clark's advice to the railway management and called it "correct every word of it." Clark, it observed, had put his finger on the real reason for "mob violence"—the refusal of the capitalists to permit the workers to organize and defend themselves against exploitation. "In endeavoring to weaken the power of the working people to protect their rights, by preventing organization, employers have increased the danger to their possessions an hundredfold. Gentlemen, the way to prevent another reign of terror is to help organize the laborers of the country."[46]

Although both Clark and the *Emancipator* demonstrated genuine sympathy for and understanding of the problems of the strik-

ers, the proposal they advanced as to how the Workingmen's Party of the United States could help eliminate the class struggle was naive indeed.

While the debate between Clark and the *Cincinnati Commercial* was going on, the Great Strike came to Cincinnati. It broke out at ten in the morning of Monday, July 23, when the workers of the Ohio & Mississippi line quit work and promptly besieged the railroad's roundhouse. A large crowd assembled and later paraded up and down the tracks, blocking switches, pulling spikes, and preventing anyone from taking out the trains.[47]

On Tuesday morning, the Louisville Short Line announced that it would rescind its reduction and thereby avoided a strike. At nine o'clock, the crowd at the Ohio & Mississippi roundhouse adjourned to the Dayton Short Line freight depot, and the men there quit work. Then the crowd proceeded to the Cincinnati, Hamilton & Dayton yards, where it stopped a passenger train.[48]

At four thirty, Mayor R.H. Moore arrived and pleaded with the strikers not to turn "this fair city" into a "little Pittsburgh." He announced his sympathy with the strikers, said he wanted to see them get a fair wage, and promised that he would not call on Governor Young for military support. "Military!" he shouted. "Well, we don't want any of that."[49] The strikers cheered and went off to stop another passenger train. The *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* accused the mayor of doing the bidding of the local Workingmen's Party, and called his speech to the strikers "insipidly sweet, wishy-washy, old grannyish, silly, senile, canting, whining, truckling, toadying, crawling, groveling, fawning, flattering, and in effect, encouraging to rioters and humiliating to the city authorities."[50]

It is difficult to determine just how much influence the Workingmen's Party had on the mayor's decision to act rationally. Its members were reported to be "active among the men in the yards," and the conduct of the strikers and their sympathizers up to that point clearly showed the party's restraining hand.[51] But Mayor Moore soon revealed that his sense of reason had limits. On Tuesday evening, July 24, the crowd at the Cincinnati, Hamilton & Dayton depot was

temporarily dispersed by a cloudburst, and the company managed to sneak out four passenger trains to Dayton. The news of these successes quickly brought the strikers and their sympathizers back, and all other trains were stopped. By noon on Wednesday, July 25, the crowd had swelled to a thousand, and the president of the line wired Mayor Moore for help.

Although the Workingmen's Party spokesmen appealed to the mayor not to surrender to corporate dictation, Moore decided that he really did not sympathize with the strikers. Shortly after one in the afternoon, he swept down on the crowd with 125 constables, drove the strikers out, and arrested their leaders, including several members of the Workingmen's Party who had still been cautioning against violence as the constables approached. Then the mayor closed all the saloons, swore in special police, organized a citizens' corps, and stationed an armed guard in the railroad yards with instructions to shoot anyone trying to stop trains.[52] The next day, the trains moved out under police protection, and the Great Strike was over in Cincinnati. By the end of the month, all of the companies were operating on their normal schedules.[53]